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# French Canada and the War (Canada)

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In 1917, with tens of thousands of Canadian soldiers killed and wounded, the end of the war was nowhere in sight. As the supply of volunteers dried up, conscription became the dominant issue in Canada. French Canadians were singled out and accused of not supporting Canada's overseas military commitments to the same extent as English-speaking Canadians. Literature on French Canada and the war highlights the bitter divisions over conscription and its enduring legacy.

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## Introduction

In spring 1917, more than 30,000 Canadians had died on the European battlefields. Tens of thousands more had been wounded and there were no signs that the war was coming to an end. The supply of Canadian men volunteering was slowing considerably. In newspapers and other public forums, Canadians expressed profound disagreements over the extent of the country's contribution to the war and the cost of their sacrifice. Like every country at war, Canada was faced with many difficult decisions: Should the troops be brought back home or should the war be fought to the bitter end, no matter the cost? Should the government implement conscription and force young men to go overseas and risk their lives without their consent?

Canada's national unity was severely challenged in 1917 by the recruitment issues. Relations between anglophones and francophones were increasingly tested and strained. Fingers were pointed: French Canadians were accused of not contributing enough soldiers, and many of them insisted it was not their war but rather a far-away imperial conflict. The debate was fierce and bitter.

How did the war become so divisive?

## French Canada's Response to the War

The French Canadian response to the war in August 1914 was no different from the rest of the country, at least so it seemed. At the outbreak of the war, Canada was a Dominion of the British Empire. When Britain was at war, Canada was at war. However, the nature of Canada's contribution to the war effort was in Ottawa's hands. Sir Wilfrid Laurier (1841-1919), leader of the

opposition, a former prime minister, and French Canada's leading politician, called for a truce to party strife and insisted that Canada must do everything in her power to support the war. Even Henri Bourassa (1868-1952), anti-imperialist and figurehead of the Quebec nationalist movement, approved Great Britain and France's entry into the war and said that it was natural for any Canadian to wish for the triumph of the Franco-British troops.<sup>[1]</sup> Olivar Asselin (1874-1937), Bourassa's lieutenant, decided to enlist to fight for France, stating it was essential for the survival of the French Canadian civilization.<sup>[2]</sup> But few Canadians at the time predicted that their nation would soon become a major participant in the bloodiest conflict the world had yet seen, or that the war would place enormous political and social strain on Canada.

### **French Canada and Recruitment**

Almost a quarter of the country's eligible men lived in Quebec in 1914, but only 11 percent of the recruits in that province were Quebec-born.<sup>[3]</sup> Montreal, the largest city in the province, included a good proportion of anglophone residents who enlisted and are counted in that number. How many of the volunteers were French Canadians? The answer remains uncertain because the mother tongue of recruits was not recorded on their attestation papers.<sup>[4]</sup> What is certain, however, is that the complaint that Quebec wasn't doing its part in terms of recruitment was soon voiced across the country.

In light of a seemingly nation-wide agreement to support the war in the early months, it is not surprising that a substantial proportion of the literature on French Canada and the First World War focused on explaining why it did not or could not or would not provide as many soldiers as other parts of the country. In an article published in June 1969, historian Desmond Morton indicated that exploring the state of the Canadian militia half a century prior to the First World War was crucial to understanding the failure to integrate French Canadians into the English-only expeditionary force and the resulting devastating blow to the national unity during the war.<sup>[5]</sup> Four decades later, Morton, one of Canada's leading historians, reiterated that recruitment in the province of Quebec posed some inherent structural difficulties. Unlike many predominantly anglophone provinces, Quebec had not experienced a brief, intense period of militarism prior to the war, which often took the form of cadet corps in schools. Furthermore, the Quebec francophones received very little attention when the army was restructured at the turn of the century. They were similarly overlooked when Minister of Militia and Defense Sam Hughes (1853-1921) organized the battalions at the beginning of the war. The Department of Militia and Defense's policy was unilingualism; Minister Hughes refused to appoint a senior French-Canadian officer to command the troops and did not allow a French-Canadian battalion in the First Contingent to go overseas.

Another crucial factor noted by Desmond Morton and echoed by many historians is the idea that recruitment schemes in 1914 encouraged Canadians of British descent to identify with their British ancestors and to respond enthusiastically to the demands of imperial patriotism. This attitude had very little appeal to French Canadians and to English Canadians who were long established in Canada.<sup>[6]</sup> Most French Canadians did not feel a passionate commitment to France either. Some considered that France had abandoned them many centuries before at the end of the Seven Years War, while others even believed that France was being punished for her contentious secular reforms.<sup>[7]</sup>

Furthermore, high rates of unemployment in 1914 and 1915 had encouraged enlistment but by 1916 there was full employment in Canada. A booming wartime industrial economy was strongly competing with the army for volunteers. Many men in Montreal preferred the better paid, less dangerous and readily available jobs in munitions factories.<sup>[8]</sup>

Farmers from across the country, including the province of Quebec, also considered the federal and provincial governments out of touch with the rural labour situation as they promoted both enlistment and increased production with equal fervour. The farmers argued that conscription would lead to further depopulation of the land, which would be disastrous for food production. Days before the federal election in December 1917, Prime Minister Robert Borden's (1854-1937) Unionist Party promised to exempt farmers' sons from military service. When the exemption was withdrawn in April 1918, farmers felt betrayed. In protest, over 4,000 farmers from Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba, and the Maritimes converged on Ottawa on 14 May 1918. But Prime Minister Borden refused to change his mind, stating that achieving victory overseas trumped home front politics.<sup>[9]</sup>

The situation was also complicated for French Canadians outside of Quebec. Between 1914 and 1918, language of instruction in schools was a contentious issue in Ontario. In 1912, Regulation XVII was passed by the Conservative government of Sir James P. Whitney (1843-1914), restricting French as a language of instruction to the first few years of primary school. The

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French-Canadian elite decried the act as a violation of what they perceived as the francophone minority's right to be educated in French.<sup>[10]</sup> Editorialists in many Quebec and Ontario francophone newspapers, especially Ottawa's *Le Droit*, blamed Regulation XVII for the lower number of recruits amongst French Canadians. Why should francophones sacrifice their lives for the British flag if they were shunned and hounded by the representatives of the flag in Canada?<sup>[11]</sup> Editorialists from *Le Droit* considered the conscription act and Regulation XVII as part of a "conspiracy from English-Canadian Prussians to wipe out French from Canada".<sup>[12]</sup>

Andrew Theobald has also shown that the New Brunswick Acadians' response to the war and to conscription was a complex one, characterized by bitter debates between the elite and the masses, between supporters of the two main political parties, and by the long-standing division between the French-speaking and the English-speaking regions within the province. Theobald argued that Acadian opposition was founded upon settlement and occupational factors rather than ethnic ones, although this objection was fostered by the self-seeking actions of the anglophone majority and its widely held belief that all French Canadians were slackers who refused to enlist. Nearly all of New Brunswick's English-language politicians, military officers and newspapers disregarded the Acadian contribution to the war effort and ignored the sources of anti-conscription sentiment, including the fact that many francophone New Brunswickers were labourers, farmers and fishermen and that these occupational groups tended to oppose conscription.<sup>[13]</sup>

## The Conscription Crisis, the Riots and the Bitter Legacy

No matter how the recruitment problems were perceived and interpreted, the fact remains that many English Canadians were convinced that most French Canadians were not doing their fair share to win the war. The conscription debate was still raging when the Military Service Act worked its way through Parliament during the summer of 1917. In 1914, Prime Minister Borden had promised not to resort to conscription but by 1916, he had also pledged 500,000 soldiers to help win the war. That was a substantial number for a nation of 7.5 million.

A trip to the battlefields in the spring of 1917 convinced him that only through conscription could another 100,000 men be sent overseas to keep Canadian divisions up to fighting strength.<sup>[14]</sup> Despite the passing of the Military Service Act in August 1917, conscription was still the main issue in the fall federal election campaign and the debate was vicious and divisive. The wealth of posters and other propaganda material produced by the Unionist Party during the election campaign show that the government was actively fuelling the anti-Québec and anti-Laurier sentiment. Newspapers articles also give a good idea of the atmosphere. The *Manitoba Free Press* wrote:

There is no longer any reason why the whole truth should not be spoken about Quebec. The people of that Province have been ranked quitters throughout the whole war. They have been prolific in excuses and evasions, and in nothing else. The general election of December 17 is to decide whether or not they are to take charge of Canada for the remainder of the war.<sup>[15]</sup>

If sharing the terrible burden of the war was a recurrent theme, many Canadians – including farmers and munitions workers – agreed with Quebec journalist Henri Bourassa that: "Canada has given to the war all that it can spare of man-power without grave danger to its own existence and that of the allied countries."<sup>[16]</sup>

Others, like journalists at the *Le Bien public* in Trois-Rivières, argued that conscription was an outright attack on the Canadian Confederation:

Exactly fifty years after the signature of the Confederation pact, Prime Minister Borden is about to impose the military conscription sought by Imperialists, against the will of a majority of the population. The Confederation pact ensured justice for the people living in this country. Minority rights were carefully planned and protection was ensured.<sup>[17]</sup>

The results of the December 1917 federal election reflect the colossal breech in national unity: Borden's Unionists won 153 seats while Laurier's Liberals, who had run on a platform of no conscription, won eighty-two seats, although sixty-two of sixty-five seats in the province of Quebec. In the aftermath of the election, tensions in Quebec rose to such a level that Joseph-Napoleon Francoeur (1880-1965) proposed a motion in the province's Legislative Assembly that argued in favour of Quebec's secession from Canada. While it never came to a vote, the motion demonstrates the extent to which Quebec felt alienated.<sup>[18]</sup>

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According to historian Martin Auger, by the spring of 1918, the country was on the brink of civil war. Anti-conscription demonstrations had been held regularly in many major cities of Quebec in the summer of 1917. The situation deteriorated when the Canadian government began to enforce the Military Service Act on 1 January 1918, calling 400,000 men for military service across Canada, and sent Dominion Police officers to Quebec to enforce the law. Following multiple months of high tension, a large crowd gathered in the Saint-Sauveur neighbourhood of Quebec City on 1 April 1918, throwing projectiles and firing shots at local soldiers. After instructing the crowd to disperse, troops were ordered to open fire. Four civilians died and over 100 citizens and soldiers were wounded. Resolved to enforce conscription and concerned about a province-wide uprising, the federal government proclaimed martial law, suspended *habeas corpus*, and deployed over 6,000 armed English-speaking soldiers from Ontario and Western Canada, most of them conscripts, to Montreal and Quebec City. The Canadian government's strategy worked: there would be no anti-conscription rioting in Quebec after the Easter Riots. But almost a century later, bitter memories still linger.<sup>[19]</sup>

#### **Historiographical Renewal**

In an article published in 1999, Robert Comeau argued that for the province of Quebec, the conscription crisis was the preeminent event of the First World War, its marker of identity. Although the conscription crisis is still an integral part of the French Canadian memory of the war,<sup>[20]</sup> more and more Canadian historians are now focusing on French Canada's participation in the First World War, which was considerable in terms of men and nurses sent overseas, munitions and food production.

The involvement of French Canadians who served overseas is one of the fields garnering increased attention. Jean-Pierre Gagnon's 1986 socio-military study of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, the only francophone Canadian infantry regiment, filled an important gap in Canadian military history. The author recognized, however, that given the small number of accounts available, certain parts of the French Canadian soldiers' experience would be left in the dark. Gagnon's work was based on the written accounts of Joseph Chaballe (1876-1952),<sup>[21]</sup> Claudius Corneloup (1883-?),<sup>[22]</sup> Arthur-Joseph Lapointe (1895-1960),<sup>[23]</sup> Thomas-Louis Tremblay (1886-1951), as well as on information obtained through interviews with veterans. In 2009, Gagnon reiterated that a definitive study of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Battalion remained to be done, one that would include comprehensive research of the battalion's involvement in the operations in which it participated.<sup>[24]</sup> A comprehensive study of the French Canadian soldiers who served in other battalions than the 22<sup>nd</sup> has also not yet been undertaken.<sup>[25]</sup>

A number of French Canadian soldiers' diaries have been edited and published in the past decade and are opening doors for new research opportunities. Historian Marcelle Cinq-Mars made a significant contribution in 2006 by introducing and providing enlightening notes on the diary of Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas-Louis Tremblay, who commanded the 22<sup>nd</sup> Battalion from February 1916 until August 1918.<sup>[26]</sup> Historian Béatrice Richard edited Paul Caron's (1889-1917) war chronicles; these are a valuable contribution to the literature, as they shed light on the largely forgotten story of the French Canadians who enlisted in the French Foreign Legion.<sup>[27]</sup> It is also worth noting Michel Litalien's 2011 *Écrire sa guerre*, which brings together written accounts from more than fifty French Canadian soldiers, grouped by themes.<sup>[28]</sup>

Michel Litalien also published an innovative study in 2003 that explored the contribution of two French-Canadianhospitals that operated in France during the First World War: l'Hôpital canadien-français and l'Hôpital Laval.<sup>[29]</sup> Building on these foundations, this author conducted further research and shed light on the personal and professional experiences of the nurses who served in these French-Canadian hospitals.<sup>[30]</sup>

Other than a few studies that include French Canadiannurses,<sup>[31]</sup> the contribution of French Canadian women during the First World War is one of multiple areas of French Canada's contribution in need of more research. In the fall of 1918, Enid Price (1894-1962) began a study of the personnel in eight of the largest munitions plants in Montreal. Her results, published in 1919, argued that 52 percent of the 5,460 women employed by these plants in 1917 were French Canadians.<sup>[32]</sup> Unanswered questions include: Who were these women? What work were they doing and how did they contribute to the war? What about French Canadian women outside of Montreal? Outside of the province of Quebec?

Another area that is only starting to be studied is the French Canadian farmers' contribution to the war. As early as 1983,

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Linteau, Durocher and Robert showed that by the turn of the century, the culture of wheat in the province of Quebec was being replaced by other field crops. However, as a result of wartime federal and provincial government programs aimed at boosting agricultural production, wheat made a strong comeback in Quebec during the First World War and the harvest increased from 932,000 bushels in 1911 to more than 6 million in 1918.<sup>[33]</sup> A few researchers have started to explore Canadian farmers' contribution to the war but very little is known about the involvement of French Canadians.<sup>[34]</sup>

## Conclusion

French Canadians' participation in the First World War has received more attention from Canadian historians in the past two decades. Original sources have been uncovered and published, opening new research areas and yielding more insights into the French Canadian experiences of the war. However, there are still many areas that require further examination. For one thing, very little is known about the war experiences of French Canadian soldiers, nurses and civilians outside of the province of Quebec. A comprehensive history of Canada during the First World War, particularly of the conscription issues, would benefit greatly from a transnational study of other nations, especially Australia, New Zealand and Ireland. With the war beyond the fringes of living memory, it is important to remember and recognize the national and international dimensions of the conflict in which Canada was engaged.

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#### Notes

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- 2. † Pelletier-Baillargeon, Hélène: Olivar Asselin et son temps. Le volontaire, Québec 2001, pp. 18f.
- 3. ↑ Sharpe, Chris A.: Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1918. A Regional Analysis, in: Journal of Canadian Studies 18 (1984), pp. 15-29.
- 4. † In a newspaper article dated 8 April 1916, Sir Max Aitken, Lord Beaverbrook (1879-1964), the Canadian Records Officer, explained that the total number of French-Canadians enrolled as recruits for all the Canadian contingents remained "a matter of some doubt" but estimations varied from 15,000 to 20,000. See Aitken, Max: With the French Canadians in Flanders, in: Ottawa Citizen (8 April 1916), p. 11. Although an exact number is still unavailable, recent research brings the number closer to 35,000 French Canadians who served during the First World War. See Litalien, Michel: Écrire sa guerre. Témoignages de soldats canadiens-français (1914-1919), Outremont 2011, p. 9.
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- 14. ↑ Cook, Tim: Warlords. Borden, Mackenzie King and Canada's World Wars, Toronto 2012, p. 95.
- 15. ↑ Manitoba Free Press (28 November 1917).
- 16. † Bourassa, Henri: Conscription, Montreal 1917, p. 17.
- 17. ↑ Author's own translation. Le Bien public (5 July 1917), p. 1. "Exactement cinquante ans après la signature du pacte de la Confédération premier ministre Borden (…) s'apprête à faire voter de force, et contre le gré de la majorité du peuple, la conscription militaire voulue par les impérialistes. Le pacte confédératif garantissait la justice égale et complète aux races habitant ce pays. Les droits des minorités étaient soigneusement prévus, et leur protection assurée."

- 18. † Mann Trofimenkoff, Susan: The Dream of Nation. A Social and Intellectual History of Quebec, Montreal 1982, p. 213.
- 19. ↑ Auger, Martin: On the Brink of Civil War. The Canadian Government and the Suppression of the 1918 Quebec Easter Riots, in: Canadian Historical Review 89/4 (December 2008), pp. 503-540.
- 20. ↑ It's important to mention that if the conscription crisis is an integral part of the French Canadian historiography of the war, the conscripts themselves have not received much attention. Patrick Bouvier explored the conscripts who deserted in Bouvier, Patrick: Déserteurs et insoumis. Les Canadiens français et la justice militaire (1914-1918), Outremont 2003.
- 21. ↑ Chaballe, Joseph: Histoire du 22<sup>e</sup> Bataillon canadien-français, 1914-1919, Montreal 1952, p. 415.
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- 23. † Lapointe, Arthur J.: Souvenirs et impressions de ma vie de soldat (1916-1919), Saint-Ulric 1919, p. 109.
- 24. † Gagnon, Jean-Pierre: L'histoire du 22e bataillon (canadien-français), in: Bulletin d'histoire politique (1999), p. 55.
- 25. ↑ For more on the Acadian soldiers' contribution to the First World War, see Léger, Claude E.: Le bataillon acadien de la Première Guerre mondiale, Montreal 2001.
- 26. ↑ Cinq-Mars, Marcelle (ed.): Thomas-Louis Tremblay, Journal de guerre (1914-1918), Outremont 2006.
- 27. † Richard, La Grande Guerre 2014.
- 28. ↑ Litalien, Écrire sa guerre 2011. Two French Canadian soldiers' diaries were recently compiled and annotated by Michel Litalien. See Litalien, Michel: Honoré-Édouard Légaré. Ce que j'ai vu … Ce que j'ai vécu, 1914–1916, Outremont 2013; Litalien, Michel: Georges-Ulric Francoeur. Mon journal. France-Belgique, 1915–1916, Outremont 2011.
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- 30. ↑ Morin-Pelletier, Mélanie: Des oiseaux bleus chez les Poilus. Les infirmières des hôpitaux militaires canadiens-français postés en France, 1915-1919, in: Bulletin d'histoire politique 17/2 (2009), pp. 57-74.
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- 32. <sup>↑</sup> Price, Enid: Changes in the Industrial Occupations of Women in the Environment of Montreal during the Period of the War, 1914-1918, Montreal 1919, p. 21.
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